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# Marriage, Social Integration, and Loneliness in the Second Half of Life

## A Comparison of Dutch and German Men and Women

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Although marriage is usually considered to be socially integrative, some studies indicate that it can be privatizing, enclosing couples in isolated dyads. This study compared the availability of support, companionship, and negative relational experiences in various types of relationships for married men and women aged 40 to 85 years in the Netherlands and Germany. The Dutch demonstrated a more varied pattern of relationships beyond the nuclear family than the Germans but also reported worrying about a greater variety of people. In both countries, men relied more strongly on their partners, whereas women had more varied networks and experienced more worries. A continuum of social involvement can be drawn with German men, for whom marriage is privatizing, at one end and Dutch women, for whom marriage is highly socially integrating, at the other. Loneliness was related to the provisions of social relations, but no national and gender differences in predictors of loneliness were found.

**Keywords:** *social integration; loneliness; gender; marriage; social relations*

In this study, we explored cultural, policy, and gender differences in the social lives of married people: whether marriage has a socially integrative

**Authors' Note:** This research is based on data from the German Aging Survey, a collaborative project of the Department of Psychogerontology (F. Dittmann-Kohli), Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, and the Department of Sociology (M. Kohli), Free University of Berlin. The study was financed by the German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth. Data were collected by the Institute for Social Research Infas, Bonn, Germany. The Dutch Aging Survey was financed by the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Radboud University Nijmegen. Data were collected by ITS, Nijmegen. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nan Stevens, Center for Psychogerontology, Radboud University Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, the Netherlands; e-mail: [stevens@psych.ru.nl](mailto:stevens@psych.ru.nl).

or a privatizing influence on the social lives of Dutch and German women and men in the second half of life. It is a common assumption that being married or living with a partner has a positive influence on social integration. *Social integration* refers to involvement in social relationships and social contexts (Van Tilburg et al. 1998). Married people are more likely than the unmarried "to be integrated into social life through other relationships that are centrally or tangentially connected to the marital role" (Altergott 1985:52); for example, one acquires in-laws. Social linkages are further expanded through parenthood, a role usually shared with a partner.

Despite the positive influence of marriage on social integration, there is also evidence that marriage may be privatizing, enclosing the partners in a dyadic social world, at least in later life. In a secondary analysis of data from a time-use survey in the United States, Altergott (1985) found that older married people spent a considerable amount of time with their partners only and less time with others. In a German study, Pinquart (2003) found that married people were least likely to include friends and neighbors in their social networks and reported lower frequencies and quality of contacts with friends and neighbors than those who were divorced, widowed, or never married. Marriage seems to fulfill fundamental needs for belonging, companionship, and support (i.e., embeddedness), thereby decreasing motivation to engage in other kinds of relationships. Hence, some couples appear to live relatively isolated social lives.

One would expect that those living relatively isolated social lives would be more prone to loneliness. It is important to distinguish loneliness, a subjective experience, from objective social integration. Loneliness is "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either, quantitatively or qualitatively" (Perlman and Peplau 1981:31). As long as relationships meet personal and cultural standards, individuals will not experience loneliness.

Loneliness among the married or cohabiting has received little attention in research on middle age and later life. One reason is that partner status is such a strong predictor of loneliness. Those who lack partners are consistently lonelier than those who are married or living in consensual unions (de Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg 1995; Pinquart 2003). However, loneliness is not an uncommon experience among married people. In a survey of more than 4,000 Swedish adults aged 18 to 80 years, Tornstam (1992) found that 40% of the married felt lonely sometimes or often. In a Dutch sample of 983 people aged 40 to 85 years, 34% of the married were lonely (Stevens and Westerhof forthcoming).

In a Dutch sample of 160 adults between the ages of 65 and 75 years, Dykstra (1993) found that when older adults could rely on partners for support, additional support from friends and children was relatively ineffective in alleviating loneliness. However, in a German study of 4,130 older adults aged 53 to 79 years, Pinquart (2003) found that the frequency of contact with friends was inversely related to loneliness for the married. De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (1995) identified a variety of mediating factors that influence loneliness in later life: Besides a partner, a large network of close personal relationships with children, friends, and acquaintances and having emotionally supportive exchanges within one's social network are all important. There is thus some indication that integration in wider social circles is beneficial for married people, while there is also evidence that it may not be necessary for them.

These somewhat contradictory findings may be explained by different functions of social relations, identified in earlier research. Some studies focus mainly on social support, but Rook (1990) argued that companionship is another important, conceptually distinct provision of social relationships. Through shared leisure or discussion of common interests, companionship contributes directly to positive mental health. Friends typically serve as companions, but their contribution to well-being is more likely to be evident if measures of companionship are included along with measures of support.

In addition to positive effects, individuals may experience stress in relationships (Antonucci 2001). Rook proposed that negative experiences in relationships have a greater impact on well-being than positive experiences. Walen and Lachman (2000) found that negative experience with a partner had a greater impact on well-being than other types of negative experiences.

## **Social Policy and Cultural Differences in Relational Provisions**

There is a tendency to assume that social relationships are the same in different cultures; however, it is clear that even when social relationships appear to be similar, they may have different meanings depending on one's cultural perspective. Because Germany and the Netherlands belong to the same cultural region, one might expect to find few differences in the functioning of social relationships among the Dutch and Germans in the second half of life (Bode 2003). However, a Eurobarometer study found that older Germans relied more often on their spouses for regular help than the Dutch did (Walker and Maltby 1993). Children also provided more help in Germany,

whereas the Dutch relied more on social services and privately paid help. These differences in instrumental support can be explained by differences in the social policies of the two countries. The Netherlands is characterized by a welfare-state system that gives priority to social services for a range of support, whereas the German system assigns legal responsibility for older parents to their adult children and prioritizes financial transfers by the state (Daatland 2001).

An interesting question concerns the consequences of state support for other aspects of relationships, both within and beyond the nuclear family. Although there is a widely held view that traditional family systems have eroded as a consequence of the services and institutions within the welfare state, this *substitution hypothesis* has not received much empirical support. Most research supports the *complementarity hypothesis*: Families will be more willing to help if the burden is not too heavy and if older people are provided with financial means allowing for reciprocity (Künemund and Rein 1999). When a certain amount of instrumental support is provided by the state, emotional support might become easier to provide (Lyons, Zarit, and Townsend 2000). In other words, a specialization of support provision may evolve, with the family fulfilling certain relational needs and the state providing instrumental support.

Furthermore, it is interesting to compare the contribution of different types of relationships to the prevention of loneliness among Germans and Dutch in later life. Here, different cultural standards may play a role. In a comparison of Dutch and Italian older people, Van Tilburg et al. (1998) found that living with children, without a partner, was a loneliness-provoking situation in the Netherlands, whereas it alleviated loneliness among Italian elderly. A specific relational provision seems to be supportive, providing a sense of embeddedness, only when it corresponds to cultural patterns.

## Gender Differences in Social Relationships and Loneliness

The influence of gender on social relationships across the life span is complex and is mediated by culture. Studies in the United States have found that older women have larger networks than older men (Antonucci 2001), whereas research in the Netherlands and Germany has found no difference in the network sizes of older men and women (Smith and Baltes 1998; Van Tilburg 1995). There is rather consistent evidence that men rely more heavily on their spouses for emotional support, whereas women derive support from friends, relatives, and neighbors, in addition to their partners (Antonucci 2001; Cutrona 1996; Dykstra 1990; Kendig et al. 1999). These findings suggest that marriage may be more privatizing for

men than for women. One consequence of women's greater involvement in a variety of relationships is that they tend to experience greater relational stress than men (Antonucci 2001). Studies in various countries have also found that the quality of marital relationships has a greater impact on women's well-being than on men's (Acitelli and Antonucci 1994; Bode 2003; Quirouette and Gold 1992). This is rather surprising considering the finding that men are more reliant on their spouses.

Evidence for gender differences in loneliness within marriage is rather inconsistent. Tornstam (1992) found that after age 50, there was no gender difference in loneliness. However, Pinquart and Sörensen (2001) reported that in many studies of older adults, women are lonelier than men; this is true across marital status. In the Dutch Aging Survey, there was no gender difference in loneliness among married men and women between the ages of 40 and 85 years (Stevens and Westerhof forthcoming).

Past research suggests that different combinations of relational resources and deficits may contribute to loneliness among married men and women; therefore, an important question concerns the influence of gender on the availability of relationships and the provisions of relationships in relation to loneliness.

## Research Questions

Whether marriage has a socially integrating or privatizing influence on men's and women's social lives was addressed by the following research questions:

*Research Question 1:* Are there national differences between the Netherlands and Germany in the composition of social networks, the availability of social support, companionship, and negative relational experiences among married people in the second half of life?

*Research Question 2:* Are there gender differences in social networks and their functions between the Netherlands and Germany?

*Research Question 3:* How are nationality, gender, social networks, and their functions related to loneliness among married people in the second half of life in the Netherlands and Germany?

## Method

### Samples

The sample in the German Aging Survey consisted of randomly chosen individuals from population registers in the Federal Republic of Germany. It

**Table 1**  
**Background Characteristics by Nationality and Gender ( $N = 3,846$ )**

Characteristic	Germany		The Netherlands	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Age <sup>a</sup>	59.73	56.34	59.90	57.84
Education <sup>a</sup>	0.12	-0.16	0.14	-0.18
Household income	-0.01	0.02	0.02	-0.03
Health problems <sup>a,b,c</sup>	1.39	1.39	1.45	1.64

Note: Education and household income were transformed into  $z$  scores for comparison.

a.  $p < .001$  for gender.

b.  $p < .001$  for nationality.

c.  $p < .001$  for interaction Nationality  $\times$  Gender.

was stratified by age group (40 to 54, 55 to 69, and 70 to 85 years), sex, and residence in the former Federal Republic of Germany or German Democratic Republic. Fifty percent of those contacted ( $N = 9,613$ ) were willing to participate ( $n = 4,838$ ; Dittmann-Kohli, Bode, and Westerhof 2001).

A representative sample of 983 noninstitutionalized adults, aged 40 to 85 years, was recruited using a similar procedure for the Dutch Aging Survey (Steverink et al. 2001). The overall response rate was 48%. In both countries, the oldest adults refused to participate more often because of disability and illness, so there was an overrepresentation of healthy people aged 70 to 85 years.

This article concerns the 3,119 of the 4,838 German respondents and the 727 of the 983 Dutch respondents who were married or cohabiting. In both samples, 57% were male and 43% female. The means for background variables are reported for men and women in both countries in Table 1. The Dutch sample reported slightly more health problems on a self-report measure (scored as no limitations, slight limitations, and many limitations). The men were older and more highly educated than the women in both countries. Women reported more health problems than men in the Netherlands. The differences in household income, standardized by converting scores to  $z$  scores within each country, were not significant.

## Instruments

In both surveys, face-to-face interviews were conducted in respondents' homes. They also completed written questionnaires that included a loneliness



scale (de Jong Gierveld and Kamphuis 1985). Both surveys covered a broad range of characteristics, including demographic background, occupational history, leisure activities, social relationships, and well-being.

To identify the size and composition of their social networks, respondents were asked for the numbers of children, grandchildren, brothers, and sisters and the number of parents alive.

To measure social support, respondents were asked, "Is there anyone from outside your household who helps you with housekeeping tasks, such as cleaning the house, doing small repairs or doing the grocery shopping?" (instrumental support); "Is there someone you can go to when you feel a need to be comforted or cheered up, for example when you are sad?" (emotional support); and "If you have to make important decisions, is there someone from whom you can ask advice?" (cognitive support). Respondents were asked to name up to five people who provided each kind of support. Support providers were identified as partners, children (or grandchildren), other family, friends (and acquaintances), and other nonkin. Professional help was added as a provider for instrumental support. For each type of support and support provider, a dichotomous variable was computed.

Companionship was measured by whether respondents engaged in leisure activities (e.g., walking, attending concerts) and if they had companions for each activity. The number of activities with specific relational categories was counted.

One item referred to negative social interaction: "Are there any persons that you are distressed or worried about at present?" Respondents could identify up to three people, who were categorized in the same way as support providers.

Loneliness was measured with a Dutch loneliness scale that includes five positive and six negative items (de Jong Gierveld and Kamphuis 1985). The Dutch scale was translated into German for the German Aging Survey.

## Analyses

For the continuous variables (networks and companionship),  $2 \times 2$  analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to assess nationality and gender differences as well as the interaction between nationality and gender. Logistic regression analyses were used for the dichotomous variables (support and worries), specifying an interaction between nationality and gender besides the two main effects. Control variables (age, education, income, and health problems) and network size were entered as covariates in the ANOVAs and as independent variables in the logistic regressions to examine

**Table 2**  
**Mean Values of Family Networks, Companionship, and**  
**Loneliness by Nationality and Gender (*N* = 3,846)**

Variable	Germany		The Netherlands	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Family networks				
Number of children <sup>a</sup>	2.00	2.01	2.54	2.50
Number of grandchildren <sup>a</sup>	1.61	1.52	2.16	2.41
Number of siblings <sup>a</sup>	2.02	2.10	3.43	3.70
Number of parents alive <sup>b</sup>	0.47	0.54	0.49	0.62
Companionship				
Partner <sup>a</sup>	2.77	2.79	2.50	2.57
Family <sup>a,b</sup>	0.61	0.83	0.90	1.12
Friends	0.87	0.96	0.92	1.16
Loneliness	2.01	1.93	2.08	1.99

a.  $p < .001$  for nationality.

b.  $p < .001$  for gender.

whether national and gender differences in the provisions of social networks were related to these factors.

Ordinary least squares regression analyses were used to assess the relative contributions of control variables, nationality and gender, as well as the availability and characteristics of partners and other relations to loneliness. The regression models were also estimated for men and women in Germany and the Netherlands separately to test for differences in the predictors of loneliness. Because of the relatively large size of the samples only results at a significance level of  $p < .001$  are reported.

## Results

### National Differences in Relationships

The first research question concerned the differences in social networks and their provisions between the Netherlands and Germany. The results are shown in Table 2 (network size and companionship) and Table 3 (support and worries). According to Table 2, the Dutch had more children, grandchildren, and siblings. There was no difference in the number of parents

**Table 3**  
**Percentage of Respondents Reporting Relationships as Sources of Support and Worries by Nationality and Gender (*N* = 3,846)**

Variable	Germany		The Netherlands	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Instrumental support				
Children <sup>a</sup>	35.5	37.6	21.9	26.0
Other family	21.4	19.2	24.1	22.2
Friends	21.2	18.1	23.6	25.7
Professionals <sup>a</sup>	2.2	3.1	10.5	13.3
Other nonkin	21.8	18.8	24.3	24.4
Emotional support				
Partner <sup>b</sup>	85.6	75.6	82.1	73.7
Children <sup>b</sup>	26.8	42.5	19.4	40.0
Other family <sup>a,b</sup>	12.0	21.2	21.6	35.6
Friends <sup>a,b</sup>	10.5	23.7	23.1	41.6
Other nonkin <sup>a,b</sup>	2.9	6.1	7.4	11.8
Cognitive support				
Partner <sup>b</sup>	77.8	84.4	84.0	88.7
Children <sup>b</sup>	34.2	39.8	25.6	37.9
Other family	17.0	21.1	22.1	24.9
Friends <sup>a</sup>	16.2	22.0	31.2	27.5
Other nonkin <sup>a</sup>	6.8	6.2	13.6	7.8
Worries				
Partner <sup>b</sup>	2.9	6.0	4.6	8.3
Children <sup>a,b</sup>	8.8	13.2	18.7	27.6
Other family <sup>a,b</sup>	8.4	11.5	27.4	33.3
Friends <sup>a</sup>	0.9	0.6	7.8	8.6
Other nonkin <sup>a</sup>	1.8	1.1	4.1	3.5

a.  $p < .001$  for nationality.

b.  $p < .001$  for gender.

still alive. Similar proportions of Dutch and Germans had no children (8.5% in both countries) or no grandchildren (slightly more than 50%). A higher proportion of Germans had no brothers or sisters (19.9% vs. 6.7% in the Netherlands). This was comparable with the percentage of one-child families in both countries (23.9% and 9.9%). Hence, the larger Dutch family networks were due to having more than one child.

For companionship, Germans engaged in more activities with their partners, whereas the Dutch were more active with family members (including children). There was no difference in companionship with friends.

Table 3 shows that more Germans reported receiving instrumental support from their children, whereas more Dutch identified professionals as a source of this support. No differences in instrumental support were found for other family, friends, and other nonkin. Equal proportions of German and Dutch mentioned receiving emotional support from their partners or children, but Dutch reported receiving emotional support from other family, friends, and other nonkin more often. With regard to cognitive support, no national differences were found with regard to partners, children, and other family. More Dutch mentioned cognitive support from friends and other nonkin than Germans. A higher percentage of the Dutch worried about children, other family, friends, and other nonkin, but there were no differences between Dutch and German with respect to worrying about partners.

In both countries, partners were the central source of companionship and emotional and cognitive support. Children were mentioned more frequently as a source of instrumental, emotional, and cognitive support, compared with other relations besides partners in Germany. In the Netherlands, children, other family, and friends all provided different forms of support to a similar degree.

Controlling for age, education, income, health problems, and family size, we found that all national differences remained significant, except for companionship with partners and cognitive support from other nonkin. The other differences therefore cannot be attributed to the higher level of health problems and the larger families in the Netherlands. In fact, the difference in amount of emotional and cognitive support provided by children between the two countries increased, with even higher levels among the Germans.

In conclusion, partners played the most important role in the networks of married people in both countries. Children were more important as sources of support in Germany, whereas the Dutch networks of support providers were more varied beyond the nuclear family. Most national differences were found with regard to the emotional aspects of relations, that is, emotional support and worries.

## Gender Differences in Relationships

The second research question concerned differences between men and women regarding networks and their provisions. Tables 2 and 3 break down the national differences by gender. The analyses reveal that there were no interactions between nationality and gender. Hence, the reported gender differences applied to both countries.

There were no gender differences in the number of children, grandchildren, or siblings in both countries (Table 2). When age was included as a covariate in the ANOVA, there was also no gender difference in the number of parents alive. Table 2 shows that there were no gender differences in companionship with partners and friends. Women were somewhat more active in leisure activities with their family members.

Table 3 shows that no gender differences were found regarding instrumental support in either country. More German and Dutch men relied on their partners for emotional support, whereas women also reported emotional support from children, other family, friends, and other nonkin. More women mentioned cognitive support from their partners and children, but they also reported worrying about these relationships as well as about other family members. Controlling for age, education, income, health problems, and family size, all gender differences remained significant, except for worries about other family members.

In conclusion, men relied more on their partners for emotional support. This can be seen as a privatizing aspect of the partner relationship for men. Women had more varied supportive networks within the family as well as more emotional support from friends and other nonkin. Women also reported worrying more about their partners and families.

## Loneliness

The last research question concerned differences in loneliness by nationality, gender, social networks, and their provisions. The last line of Table 2 shows that there were no national and gender differences in loneliness. Yet the reported differences in background characteristics, size, and provisions of networks by nationality and gender may be related to loneliness. We therefore did a regression analysis controlling for these differences.

In the first step, nationality and gender were entered along with the control variables (age, income, education, and health problems). Table 4 indicates that health problems were related to loneliness in the expected direction; those who reported more problems experienced more loneliness. Furthermore, there was a significant gender difference when controlling for these variables, indicating that women were less lonely than men. Women and men appeared to be equally lonely at first sight. However, men with the same number of health problems as women were more lonely. Thus, health problems had a suppressing effect on the relation between gender and loneliness.

**Table 4**  
**Regression Solutions for Background Characteristics,**  
**Nationality, Gender, Partner Relations, and Other Relations**  
**on Loneliness of Married Men and Women ( $n = 2,964$ )**

Variable	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Nationality	.02	.03	.02	.03	.05	.03	.04
Gender	-.07*	-.07*	-.08*	-.08*	-.06	-.06	-.05
Age	-.06	-.04	-.07	-.08	-.09*	-.08	-.08
Education	-.04	-.04	-.02	-.02	-.02	-.02	-.02
Income	-.05	-.05	-.04	-.03	-.02	-.03	-.03
Health problems	.07*	.07*	.06*	.06*	.06*	.07*	.07*
Number of children		.00	-.00	-.01	-.01	.00	-.00
Number of grandchildren		-.06	-.06	-.06	-.06	-.05	-.05
Number of brothers and sisters		.00	-.01	.00	.00	.00	.01
Number of parents alive		-.01	-.00	.00	.00	-.01	.00
Partner: emotional support			-.09*	-.08*	-.09*	-.09*	-.09*
Partner: cognitive support			-.08*	-.08*	-.08*	-.08*	-.08*
Partner: companionship			-.08*	-.05	-.05	-.04	-.04
Partner: worries			.08*	.08*	.08*	.09*	.09*
Friends: companionship				-.12*	-.10*	-.10*	-.10*
Friends: emotional support					-.10*	-.10*	-.09*
Children: instrumental support						-.09*	-.09*
Family: emotional support							-.07*
Adjusted $R^2$	.01	.01	.05	.06	.07	.07	.08

\* $p < .001$ .

In the second step, we entered the network variables (numbers of children, grandchildren, siblings, and parents). These objective measures were not related to loneliness. In the third step, we entered the partner variables (companionship, support, and worries). Each of these variables was related to loneliness. Those people who reported more companionship with their partners, as well as more emotional and cognitive support from their partners, were less lonely; people who worried about their partners were more lonely.

In the following steps, we entered the provisions of relationships other than those from partners. We used a stepwise procedure here to minimize the number of variables included in the equation. Table 4 indicates that companionship and emotional support from friends, instrumental support from children, as well as emotional support from family showed significant inverse relationships to loneliness. Emotional and instrumental support as well as companionship with others than partners were important in reducing loneliness, but cognitive support from and worries about others than

partners were not related to loneliness. An interesting finding was that the effect of companionship with one's partner was no longer significant when companionship with friends was included in the analysis. The effect of gender was no longer significant when emotional support from friends was introduced. The advantage of being female in relation to loneliness has to do with women receiving emotional support from friends more often than men do.

In conclusion, objective characteristics of family networks were not related to loneliness, but subjectively experienced provisions by partners, children, other family, and friends were. It appears that it is the type of relationship and specific relational provisions, rather than the objective availability of relationships, that apparently affects loneliness. Nevertheless, only slight variance in loneliness was explained by the variables used in this study.

To test the differences in predictors of loneliness by nationality and gender, we estimated the regression equation for men and women in Germany and the Netherlands separately. Although there were some minor variations in the patterns of predictors of loneliness, no significant differences in regression coefficients were found. Therefore, the regression equation reported in the last column of Table 4 applies to men and women in both countries.

## Conclusion

Although Germany and the Netherlands belong to the same cultural region of Europe, there are clear differences between the two countries regarding integration into wider social circles among married people in the second half of life. Germans rely more on their partners and children for support and companionship than do the Dutch. This finding is striking because families are smaller in Germany (SCP 2000), and the possibility of children living relatively far from their parents is greater in Germany than in the Netherlands. One interpretation for the strong focus on the nuclear family among married people in Germany is that family ties are more essential for survival in a state that offers less support.

The Dutch report a greater variety in their sources of emotional support and companionship, which include other family members, friends, and other nonkin, in addition to partners and children. The pattern for instrumental support mirrors the findings of the Eurobarometer study (Walker and Maltby 1993), in that the Dutch rely on professional help more often.

This suggests that some substitution with regard to instrumental support has taken place in the Netherlands. However, this substitution does not result in a general erosion of family ties. Instead, specialization in types of exchanges between family members seems to develop. A striking finding is that friends are as important as children in providing emotional support in the Netherlands, in contrast to Germany. There is clear evidence for a high degree of social integration among the Dutch, and little evidence for the privatization that was identified among the Germans. One cost of maintaining a more varied social network is evident; the Dutch report worrying about other family, friends, and other nonkin more often.

Various significant gender differences were found in the provision of support and companionship. Men relied primarily on their wives for emotional support; other relations were important to a much smaller group of men than women. Despite the reliance on their wives, men worried less about their partners than women did; they also worried less about children and other family. Women in turn have more varied sources of emotional support that include children, other family, friends, and other nonkin in addition to their partners. They reported more companionship with family, including children, for leisure activities. Finally, women worried more about others such as their partners, children, and other family, in accordance with their role as kin keepers. In later life, marriage appears to be more privatizing for men than for women in both the Netherlands and Germany. This conclusion corresponds to results from studies in North America, Japan, and Australia (Cutrona 1996; Kendig et al. 1999).

Comparing the national and gender differences, one conclusion is that the Dutch have a more feminine pattern of relationships, which involves the provision of support and companionship from more varied relationships. There is a stronger focus on emotional support and worries in the Netherlands, suggesting a higher emotional involvement in relationships. This interpretation fits with Hofstede's (2001) finding of higher femininity scores in the Netherlands compared with other European countries, as well as the greater importance attached to "relatedness" in the Netherlands than in Germany (Bode 2003).

By combining results on different provisions, it is possible to draw a continuum of involvement in social relationships. German men are at one end of this continuum, in that they rely strongly on their wives and to a lesser extent on their children. For them, marriage is privatizing. At the other end are Dutch women, with a great variety in sources of support and companionship, for whom marriage is socially integrative. In between are German women and Dutch men.



These differences in social involvements do not result in differences in loneliness. Although the explained variance in loneliness is low, this finding suggests that the privatizing and integrating aspects of marriage between Dutch and German men and women do not have a negative impact on current well-being. However, the differences may have implications for differential vulnerability to the effects of partner loss for men and women. The German men would presumably be most vulnerable to effects such as increased mortality and depression following the loss of their partners, because of their more exclusive reliance on their partner (cf. Stroebe and Stroebe 1987). Dutch women should have the most protection against negative outcomes of bereavement because of the availability of a greater variety of people offering emotional support and companionship. A recent study on depression in later life in the Netherlands found that the odds ratio for developing depression was greater for older men who were no longer married than for older women in the same position. However because many more older women actually are exposed to this risk factor, their rates of depression are higher than men's (Sonnenberg et al. 2000). In a similar vein, de Jong Gierveld et al. (1995) showed that older widowers living alone are lonelier than older widows. A post hoc analysis of the data on widows and widowers in the German Aging Survey and Dutch Aging Survey revealed that widowers in both Germany and the Netherlands were lonelier than widows. Although the difference in loneliness between widowers and widows was somewhat greater among the Germans than among the Dutch, the interaction effect between country and gender was not significant. Further comparative research is necessary to determine whether more varied social involvements actually offer Dutch women greater protection than other subgroups in this study.

Social relations and their provisions in the second half of life appear to be a result of an intricate mix of welfare regimes, cultural standards, and gender-based expectations. An important conclusion is that one should be extremely careful in generalizing findings on marriage and social relations from one country to another, even in the case of neighboring countries with a long shared history.

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